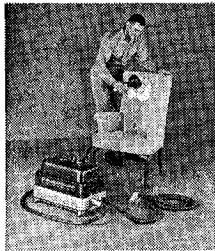


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Jack Ritchie

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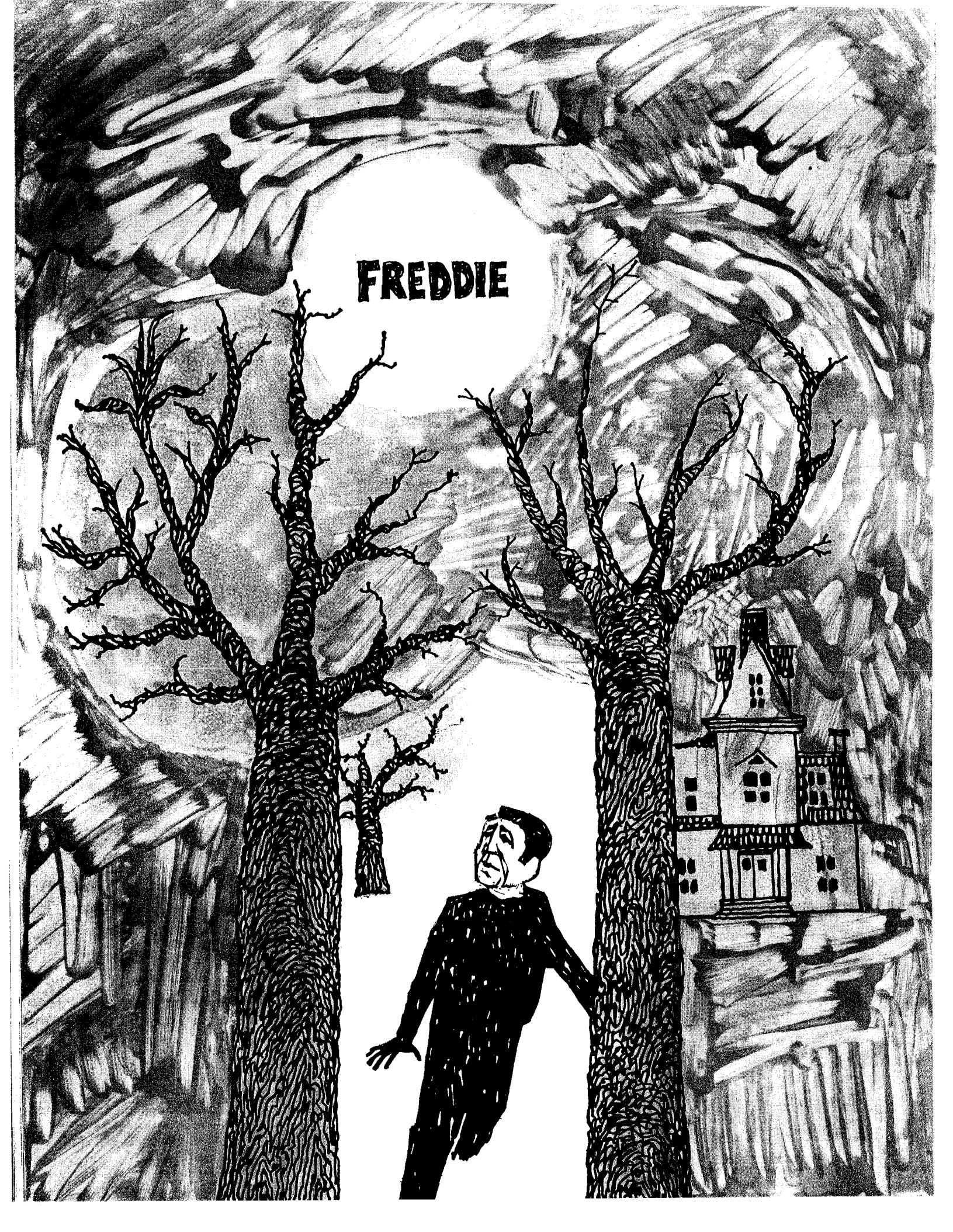
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FREDDIE



by Jack Ritchie

□ I had been driving since early morning and now I had that miserable neuralgia again—a consistent pain extending from my right ear to the point of my jaw.

There were aspirins in my pocket, but I am not one of those individuals who can swallow them dry.

I slowed down at the cluster of a dozen buildings at the crossroads ahead. Most of them appeared to be quite run-down and possibly abandoned. However two of them—a three-story Victorian set well back from the road and a rambling tavern-hotel—appeared to be in good condition.

I parked my car in front of the latter and went up the broad front stairs to the barroom door.

Four men, all appearing to be in their seventies, sat at a table playing cards. The bartender, also in his seventies, studied me thoroughly.

"Brandy and water," I said. "Separate."

"Sorry, sir," he said. "We're a Class B tavern. We sell only beer."

I hesitated. I am somewhat allergic to beer. It gives me all the symptoms of a cold. But perhaps just a sip or two to down the aspirins would do no harm.

When the glass stein was put before me, I opened my tin of aspirins and then frowned. The neuralgia seemed to have disappeared completely.

The bartender watched me return the unopened tin to my pocket.

"Neuralgia," I said. "I had it until just a few seconds ago, but now it's gone."

He nodded almost eagerly. "Sometimes it happens that way. For no reason. And other times there's a reason." He drew a beer for himself. "Just call me Albert."

I regarded the stein of beer for a moment and then decided to drink it, allergy or no allergy.

I listened to the rattle of china and silverware in the background and realized that I was really quite hungry. I found the dining room and took one of the smaller tables.

As I ate, I glanced about the room. There were a dozen or so other diners and all of them appeared to be at the very least in their seventies, though all seemed to enjoy vigorous health and appetite.

They glanced in my direction frequently and I had the feeling that I was probably the main topic of their conversation.

After dinner I went back into the barroom. The previous beer did not seem to have effected me, so I ordered another.

The thought of driving another hundred miles tonight was entirely unappealing. "Would you have any extra rooms?" I asked Albert.

Albert beamed. "I'll give you the one Norbert had."

He showed me to a large comfortably furnished room with a fireplace. Well-filled bookshelves lined the walls.

"Norbert had this room for twelve years," Albert said. "But then his time came."

I read until ten and then went to sleep. However at two in the morning I woke abruptly. The neuralgia had returned.

I sighed, found my aspirins, and went down the hall to the bathroom. I filled a paper cup with water and swallowed two tablets.

A slightly-built man, his face gray and obviously ill, swayed into the doorway.

I recognized him as one of the diners I'd seen earlier and I remembered someone calling him Charley.

I quickly drew another cup of water.

"Do you have pills or something you ought to take?"

He shook his head. "No need. It never lasts more than fifteen minutes or so. Never know when it'll strike, but thank goodness this is the last time."

He drank the water I offered and I helped him back to his room.

In my own room, I stood at the window fronting the road below while I waited for the aspirins to take effect.

The Victorian mansion across the way appeared to be entirely dark, except for a faint pulsating glow from one of the upstairs windows.

I watched it for five minutes and then went back to bed.

The next morning I awoke quite refreshed despite the interruption in my night's sleep. Downstairs at breakfast, I found most of the other guests already eating, including Charley, and he now appeared to be the picture of health.

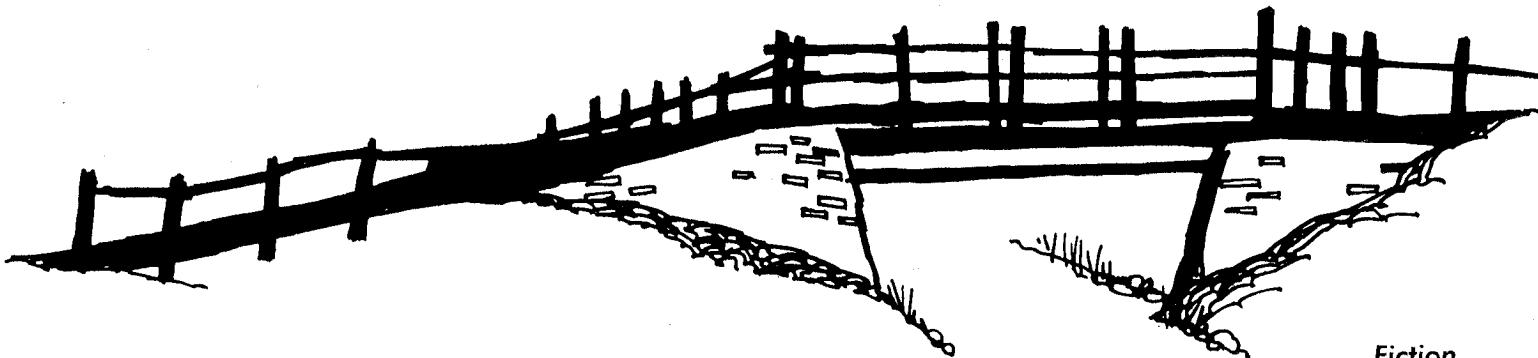
When I finished eating, I experienced a reluctance to leave. Why did I have to get back to the city today anyway? It was Saturday and I would just sit in my apartment until Monday.

I found Albert. "I've decided to stay another night."

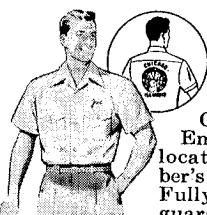
He smiled broadly. "I knew you would."

I lit a cigar and stepped outside into the back garden, a well-kept plot of vegetables and flowers, all of them thriving.

Charley joined me. "There's nothing I like better than coming into the garden armed with just a salt shaker." He selected a cherry tomato from a vine. "I'm eighty-four. I'll be leaving tonight. Usually we have a party when someone goes, but my style is a handshake and a goodbye." He extended a hand.



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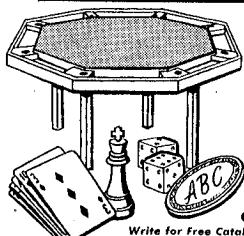
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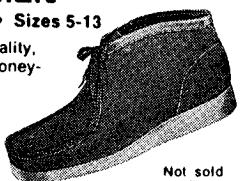
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Automatically I shook it. "You're leaving?"

He nodded. "When everyone's asleep."

I spent a supremely restful day. I am one of those people who is never bored when he has nothing to do. I am bored only when I am forced to do something I do not wish to do, which has happened too frequently in my life.

That evening after dinner, I took a pitcher of draft beer up to my room.

I read until nearly midnight and then went to the window. The strange glow still emanated from the second story of the house across the road. The rest of the building remained dark.

I heard the sound of a door opening and closing down below and Charley stepped into view.

He whistled a popular tune of the thirties as he crossed the road and went to the front door of the Victorian mansion.

The first story of the entire structure now lit up. I could not see inside, however, the blinds and drapes had all been drawn.

Charley opened the large front door and disappeared inside.

Twenty seconds later, the lights went out and the house lapsed into darkness once more.

Except for the faint glow from the upper story.

Welcome.

I turned. The voice had come some six inches from my ear and yet there was no one beside me, or in the entire room, for that matter.

And then instantly, concisely, and precisely, the answer was imposed upon my mind.

The voice had come from something in the house across the road. It lived on the second story. It had come from somewhere other than this earth.

And yes, it glowed.

I blinked. "How the devil did you get here?"

"I never could read those blasted celestial charts. In short, I got lost."

Belligerency rose within me. "I suppose you intend to conquer earth?"

The voice laughed. "This Planet of Idiots? Certainly not. I remain here only until I can fully re-energize and depart, which should be in the spring of 2073 earth time."

"What have you done to Charley?"

"I consumed him."

"You ate Charley?"

"Consumed. The process was instantaneous, painless, and he left with a smile on his face. I am not able to lengthen anyone's life, but I do have the power to make the last years pleasant. Charley, for instance, was slated to spend the final decade of his life bed-ridden and in pain. I gave him those years as a healthy vital individual. In exchange, when his time came, he gratefully gave me his body for its molecular salvage value."

"And now you intend to consume me?"

"Not at all. You've got another forty years ahead of you. But I do need you to replace Norbert. His time came a week ago and I really hated to see him go."

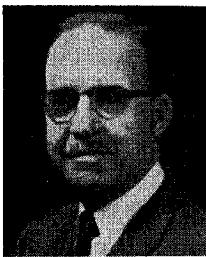
I touched my forehead. Surely I must be dreaming.

The voice continued. "I need someone to manage things here at the hotel. Someone who can meet the public when it is necessary. Someone who will see to it that my guests are comfortable, the groceries ordered, the bills paid, the help supervised, the laundry sent out, and so on. The situation here isn't as simple as you might think at first glance."

I blinked for the second time that night. "You want me to stay here as your manager?"

(Continued on page 53)

Obituaries



PAST DISTRICT DEPUTY George E. McCarthy, who was a life member of Utica, N.Y., Lodge, died May 22, 1974.

Brother McCarthy served as Exalted Ruler of his lodge for 1947-1948 and was appointed District Deputy Grand Exalted Ruler for the Central District in 1949-1950.

PAST DISTRICT DEPUTY Victor W. Kuhl, who was a member of St. Petersburg, Fla., Lodge, died recently.

Having held the office of Vice President for 1949-1950, he was appointed District Deputy Grand Exalted Ruler for the Central District for the year 1950-1951.

PAST GRAND LODGE COMMITTEEMAN Marion S. Bell, a member of Orlando, Fla., Lodge, died recently.

While a member of Anderson, S.C., Lodge, he served as Exalted Ruler and became District Deputy Grand Exalted Ruler for South Carolina in 1950-1951.

Brother Bell was on the GL Committee on Credentials. He served on the GL Ritualistic Committee for three years and acted as the chairman from 1960-1962.

FREDDIE (Continued from page 38)

"There are a number of fringe benefits. You will no longer suffer those bouts with neuralgia. You will cease being allergic to beer, as you may have noticed. You will no more break out into a rash when you eat chocolate. And you will not suffer that eye strain after you have been reading only five or six hours."

I did not panic. I very calmly dressed, packed my suitcase, and went out to my car.

I drove perhaps half a mile and was within sight of a small stone bridge when I felt my foot taken off the accelerator and applied firmly to the brake. My arms were forced to ease the car to the shoulder of the road and the engine went dead.

"Damn," I said. "Did you do that?" "Yes."

I sat there fuming. What name should I attach to this creature? Xltphanerib? Colathologimog? Or something that tripped lightly on the tongue, as Yguunoblitibee?

No. I would call the miserable invader Freddie.

"I rather like that." Freddie said. Xltphanerib, Colatholoimog, and Yguunoblitibee are so common. But Freddie has a ring to it. Yes, a definite ring."

So Freddie could read my mind? "Hadn't you noticed?"

I listened to the crickets for a full minute. "Just how far does your power extend?"

"I confine myself to a radius of approximately a mile. I regard that stone bridge ahead as my eastern boundary. However, under provocation, I can exert myself to meet the need, though it does take a bit out of me."

I studied the bridge. "Suppose I somehow managed to get over the bridge. Would you let me have my freedom?"

Freddie sighed. "Very well. Perhaps a challenge of sorts will brighten your life here. However, in all honesty, you will be attempting the impossible."

I re-started the car—with Freddie's permission—and turned back to the hotel.

Yes, Freddie's ability to read my mind did present a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. I could not even conceive an escape plan without Freddie being in on the ground floor, so to speak.

I pulled up in front of the hotel. "Is everyone here under your power?"

"Only the permanent guests. As for the kitchen help, the waitresses, the deliverymen, and so forth, they are not even aware that I exist."

In the weeks that followed I was

able to reduce the daily bookkeeping chore to less than thirty minutes a day.

Also I attempted to hide in the back of the bakery driver's panel truck, but Freddie stopped me with my hand on the door latch. And I walked to the bridge pretending to study the flora on the stream bank, but intending to make a mad leap for freedom. However Freddie tripped me and got grass stains on my shirt. I even tried to phone the state police, but Freddie stopped me in mid-dial.

It was near the end of October when I woke suddenly in the middle of the night to find that my neuralgia had returned.

"Freddie," I said, "You're not keeping your part of the bargain."

Freddie said nothing.

I frowned and went to the window. The house across the road appeared to be totally dark.

Had Freddie left us? Was he dead? Had he perhaps acquired some earth virus and expired of the sniffles?

I peered intently at the house.

No. It was not absolutely dark. Not quite. There was just the faintest perceptible glow. Freddie was still there, and yet . . .

I felt my heart-beat accelerating.

Damn it, Freddie was *asleep!* And when Freddie slept, he was not master of the situation. He could not read my mind and he could not prevent me from leaving.

I did not pause even to put on my slippers. I snatched my car keys from the bureau top and rushed downstairs. I hopped gingerly over the gravel and slipped into my car. The motor gurgled once and that was all.

The battery was dead. Of course it would be. My car had been standing here idle for over three months.

I winced my way back over the gravel to the bicycle leaning against the side of the building and hopped on. I swung onto the road and pedaled doggedly, the road ahead of me clear in the gibbous moonlight.

At the end of a quarter mile, I was puffing and after what seemed like eons, I topped a slope and found the stone bridge just ahead.

And then I *felt* it. Freddie was stirring. He was waking up. He yawned. In his own way, of course.

The bridge lay one hundred yards ahead.

Fifty.

Freddie seemed to be just about

(Continued on page 56)

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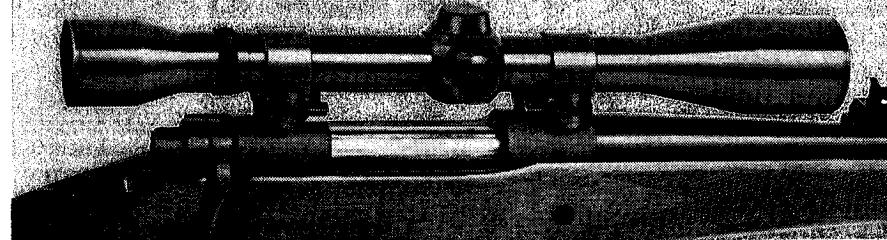
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One of the largest fund raising activities is selection of the annual Rodeo Queen. The winner is determined by the amount she raises in "votes" at a dollar a vote . . . and each vote gives the contributor a chance to win a car. Such "queen" contests are standard fund raisers in almost every community. They will usually get hundreds (sometimes thousands) of dollars if they are lucky. You'll understand our surprise, then, when we learned that the eight candidates at Santa Maria this year turned in over \$82,000!

There was a real twist to this year's contest. The young lady crowned queen was called upon to draw the winning ticket for two small cars. From the drum came the winner . . . and she had pulled her own ticket! It made nationwide news on the UPI wires.

Other projects are sales of ads and program books, concessions, a dance, booster buttons, parade seats, entry fees, a carnival, and the big banquet-barbecue.

The rodeo itself is no "neighborhood affair"; top-notch entrants come in un-

der the auspices of the Rodeo Cowboys Association and this year there were some big names in the thick of the competition.

Santa Maria's isn't the only rodeo sponsored by Elks lodges. North of Santa Maria lies Salinas, California, where lodge number 614 participates in the California Rodeo, considered one of the "big four" of the world, ranking with Calgary, Pendleton and Cheyenne. A story on the Salinas rodeo ran in *The Elks Magazine* in June, 1970.

There, too, after months of intensive planning and hard work, the Elks participation pays off for those who benefit from their charitable and benevolent efforts.

These two rodeos illustrate what can be done by lodges willing to work. They are shining examples to others and a real inspiration to all Elks.

Obviously, there are many other projects of lodges and state associations worthy of great recognition but it would be impossible to name them all; these two are outstanding examples worthy of note. Hopefully, they will inspire other lodges to "go and do likewise," thus living up to our nickname of "Best People on Earth." ■

FREDDIE

(Continued from page 53)

awake now and tuning in on the minds of his guests. When would he get to me?

Ten yards.

I put forth my last iota of effort and the bicycle sped over the bridge.

I stopped immediately. Primarily because I felt that I would expire if I pedaled another yard and secondarily because if Freddie did not intend to honor his word, a few additional feet between him and me would make no difference.

When I regained my breath, I spoke. "Well, Freddie, am I free to go?"

He sounded a bit peevish. "I suppose so. Though you do look rather silly riding a bicycle in your pajamas at three in the morning on a cold October night."

I smiled. "So you fell asleep on the job?"

Freddie sighed. "My species has long ago out-grown the need for regular sleep. However occasionally, unpredictably and regressively, we will doze off for fifteen minutes or so. You are running away from a good thing here."

I laughed shortly. "Little do you aliens from outer space realize that we human beings prize freedom more than security."

"Really?" Freddie said. "Have you taken a poll lately? Look, you've always wanted to live in a house by the side of the road and watch the rest of the world go by. As a matter of fact, you would just as soon have the house situated over the hill so that you would not have to view the road at all. You'll catch pneumonia on that side of the bridge, but not on this."

I shivered. Freddie was right about the night being cold.

"Why not come back for another month or two," Freddie said. "If you can't adjust by that time, I promise to let you go."

I shivered again. Come to think of it, the entire world had always been rather cold as far as I was concerned. When you got right down to it, I didn't really have a *bona fide* friend who would miss . . .

I hopped on the bike and re-crossed the bridge. When I got back to the hotel, I went behind the bar where Albert keeps a small display of candies. I ate three chocolate bars and then went up to my room.

"Good night, old friend," Freddie said.

I thought that over for a moment. It had never occurred to me that Freddie could be lonely too.

"All right, Freddie," I said. "I'll stay. I'll stay."

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